

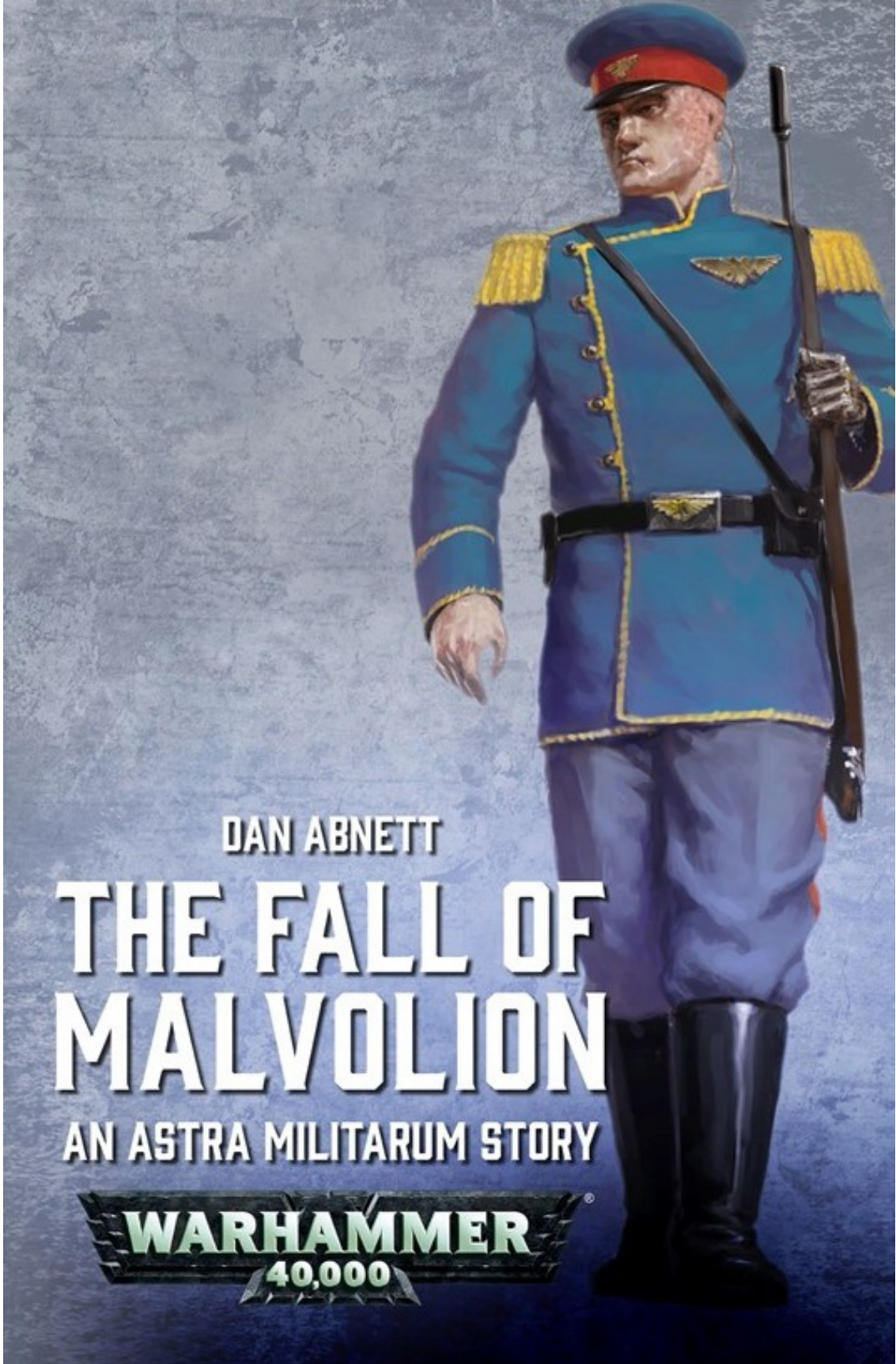


DAN ABNETT

THE FALL OF MALVOLION

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY

WARHAMMER
40,000



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THE FALL OF MALVOLION

Dan Abnett

By his wrist-chronometer, it was not yet noon, but the air was warm and clammy. Trooper Karl Grauss of the Mordian Iron Guard 15th let his lasrifle swing loose on its harness strap, wiped the perspiration from his eyes, and pushed the angular nose of the wrench-bar into the rusty door lock.

He paused and glanced around at Major Hecht. The officer was tensed, his lasrifle pulled up tight with the butt in his armpit, ready to fire. Beads of sweat dotted his face too, and it wasn't just the heat.

'What are you waiting for?' he hissed.

Grauss shrugged. He didn't know, exactly. He didn't know anything except what Hecht had told him and the others of Zwie Company that morning: get out to that pumping station in the delta and find out why they hadn't checked in for three days.

Grauss jiggled the wrench-bar until the tool locked against the latch mechanism, and then began to wind the ratchet so that the door release slowly began to turn manually.

Down the low hallway behind him, the major and six other men from Zwie hugged the walls and braced lasguns. This was the job at its worst, thought Grauss as he cranked the tool. Sneaking into a mystery and opening doors blind when you had no idea what in the name of the God-Emperor lay on the other side.

But, dammit, they were Iron Guard! More disciplined, determined Imperial soldiers you couldn't find.

They'd reached the pumping station early that morning. A cluster of machine-barns and modular habitats, it stood at a confluence of irrigation channels which watered the entire delta area and fed over a dozen farm steads. The suns were low and cool. There had been no sign of life, not even the ever-present water birds that Grauss had seen everywhere in the marshes.

And once they had got inside, with no answers to their voice or vox calls, it had been so damned hot and humid, like someone had set the environment controls to "tropical".

The latch popped and Grauss kicked the door inwards, swinging aside so that the major could slide in, gun raised and aimed.

Before them lay some kind of hydroponics workshop, with a high, cera-glass roof and metal support pillars rusting in the steamy air. Samples of crops and yield-plants stood in labelled pots and trays and bins all around. The walkways between the bins were metal grille. Sappy moisture dripped from the transparent panes above.

The Mordians fanned out into the hothouse, dripping with sweat in their temperate zone-issue fatigues and tunics.

'What's this?' called Trooper Parnell. Grauss moved over to him, and the major joined them too. Parnell gestured with disgust at a rack of culture-trays set under some daylight lamps. Nutrient feeder sprays intermittently misted what was in the trays with chemical washes.

Major Hecht cursed. The things in the trays looked like rotting, globular fungi: puffy, swollen, the size of human heads. They pulsed irregularly. None of the Mordians had any horticultural training, and none had been on Malvolion long enough to get a feel for the local flora, but they all knew this stuff just wasn't right.

'Burn it. Get a flamer in here and burn it all.' Hecht looked away from the obscene crop.

Grauss was about to obey the command when they heard the las-fire. Close by, two or three buildings away. Six short, frantic bursts, then a longer report made by several guns on auto, firing together. Zwie Company's vox-intercoms spluttered out an overlapping, unintelligible series of ear-splitting cries and yells.

The platoon turned and ran towards the sounds, Hecht in the lead. Platoon Two, scouting to the left of them, was in trouble.

Hecht's men burst into the chamber that had been Two's last recorded position.

It was a hangar barn, with several big-wheeled agricultural vehicles parked in it. The air was full of smoke from discharged weapons.

There were two bodies on the floor, both men from Two, both looking like they'd been dismembered by industrial crop-reapers.

Platoon One crept forward through the gloom, twitching for targets. Grauss found the headless corpse of another man from Two leaning against the wheel-arch of one of the agri-tractors.

Looking aside from the corpse in distaste, Grauss saw that the tractor was hitched to a big flatbed cargo truck, with something large and strange chain-lashed to it. Caked in the mud of the delta, it looked for all the world like some kind of ship: those bulbous projections at the rear could only be propulsion units. But... it was small, not large enough for anything more than a single human, and it made him sick to look at it. It wasn't made of metal. It wasn't technology as he understood it. It looked... organic. Fleishy, pod-like, akin to the things he had seen growing in the hothouse but many, many times larger. Was this something the station crew had found out there in the delta and hauled back for study?

There was a cry and a burst of las-fire behind him. Grauss spun around, in time to see Trooper Parnell's body sailing across the chamber in a welter of blood and torn flesh. Lasguns roared and flashed. Something was moving through the gloom with terrifying rapidity. Something with claws. Four sets of claws.

It sliced through Major Hecht at the waist, and his body fell in two, still firing.

It was right on Grauss now. He howled and started to fire.

Genestealer...

Grauss woke with a start. He was wet and slippery with night-sweat and his head pounded. It had been two weeks since that nightmare in the pumping station, a nightmare that only he and three others from the Zwei Company detail had survived. And he could not shake it. He'd had battle-shock before, he was a veteran. But the sheer alien horror of what he had seen, and smelled, and felt... it haunted his sleep and his waking mind.

Genestealers...

Grauss got off his barrack cot unsteadily and pulled on dirty combat fatigues. Outside it was daylight, and he could hear men and vehicles. He needed to get active. If he was going to get past the trauma, he had to keep his mind and body occupied.

He went outside, into the raw suns-light, and watched the troop trucks and cargo-machines rolling past in the mud. Unseasonal, warm rain hosed the street.

The modular roofs and towers of Malvolion Collective farm-plex 132/5 glistened and their gutters drooled.

The evacuation was underway.

As he crossed between growling heavy transports, he tried to reassure himself. He'd killed the thing, blown it apart with his lasgun. It and two more like it. Then he and the other survivors of the search detail had blown the pumping station with krak mines. They'd kept their heads, true to the famed iron discipline of the Mordians. They'd got their report back to Guard Command, and thanks to them, the planet-wide advisory had been issued.

That had to make him feel better, didn't it?

Grauss spotted Colonel Tiegl supervising the loading of transports on a stretch of hardpan behind a row of produce barns. The colonel looked hot and flustered. Settlers thronged around him, begging for more of their valuable agri-machinery to be included on the evacuation manifest.

Tiegl broke off from them as he saw Grauss approach.

'By the Golden Throne,' he muttered under his breath to the trooper, 'these people will be the death of me! I just want to get them, their loved ones and their basic possessions out of here, and they're all too worried about their damned cultivators and multi-ploughs! I've half a mind to let you tell them what you saw.'

'And cause a mass panic, sir?' smiled Grauss sadly.

Tiegl sighed. 'No, no...'

'Is there anything I can do?'

'I thought you were on sick-rest? Medic's orders?'

'Making me crazy, sir. Give me something to do, and it might take my mind off the... the things in my head.'

The colonel nodded. 'Good man. Well, we need drivers. Can you handle a truck-rig?'

'Pretty much,' said Grauss.

Tiegl consulted his dataslate and pointed to a dirt-caked eight wheeler parked over by the side sheds. 'Unit 177. She's yours.'

'What's the program?'

'I want the main evacuation section out of here by 15.00. No excuses. Anything we haven't loaded by then is staying, and that includes these bloody farmers. Uplift point is the Nacine Plains, nineteen hours north of here. According to transmitted reports, we're expecting nearly sixty bulk transports to be waiting there to take us to the orbiting fleet units. There are eight other evac convoys like

ours heading in from other collectives, so it'll pay to be on time. We want to get our place, and if things turn nasty, we don't want them leaving without us.'

'What if it does come to a fight, sir?'

'Then we'll show these alien freaks what Mordian fighting spirit is. There are seventy thousand men from our regiment deployed planetside, not to mention thirty thousand from the Phyrus regiments. General Caen has informed me that armour units are a few hours from landing, and there's even talk of help from the Chapters.'

'That's reassuring,' said Grauss. 'It may have been a little isolated outbreak we found down at the pump station, but it pays to be prepared.'

'More than prepared now,' said Tiegl, a little darkly. 'The alert's moved up a notch. Didn't anybody tell you?'

'Tell me what?'

'Off-world astropathic communications went down five hours ago. The Shadow has fallen across us. They're coming, Grauss, they're definitely coming.'

Like beached leviathans with screaming, wide mouths, the vast battle-barges squatted on the dry, stony flats of the Nacine Plain, disgorging rivers of armour amid clouds of churned, pale dust. Even from the high observation mast of the command ship, three hundred metres above ground, General Caen could hear the clank and grumble of the Paladian tanks and fighting vehicles. He swept his magnoculars around and then nodded in satisfaction. Colonel Grizmund was deploying his armour as fast as ordered, faster perhaps. A good, clean dispersal. The sky was a clear blue, and they had visibility to ten kilometres. They wouldn't be caught napping.

Caen let the magnoculars dangle against the crisp, pressed front of his immaculate Mordian uniform. Beside him on the ship's watch-platform, two servitors and three Mordian adjutants manned the supervision consoles and vox-caster sets. A steady stream of radio traffic crackled in the background.

Hanff, one of the adjutants, approached him across the metal grille and handed the general a data-slate.

'Reports in from all the evacuation points, sir. Most of the collectives are underway to us in convoy. Tiegl at Collective farm-plex 132/5 informs you they will be underway by 15:00'

'Why so slow?'

'That's where the outbreak occurred, sir. I think the colonel is being especially careful.'

Caen nodded. He knew Tiegl and trusted him well. The man would get the job done.

'And this?' he asked, pointing to the slate. 'Collective 344/9?'

'They haven't embarked either, General. Men from the Phyrus regiment are there. I... don't know what the hold up is.'

'Vox them. Find out. Tell them I'll skin them alive if they don't move soon.'

'Sir.'

The air trembled with subsonic, basso power. A shadow passed over them. Another ten thousand ton bulk transport swung down in to land on the plain, braking jets squirting blue flames.

'The *Ariadne*,' said Hanff. 'Right on time.'

Boots clanged up the mast ladder and Colonel Grizmund pulled himself up onto the platform. He was a tall, thick-set man wearing the crimson battledress of the Paladian armour brigade proudly. He saluted Caen.

'Reporting in person,' he said. 'We're ready to move out. 'Where do you want us?'

Caen shook the colonel's hand and showed him the chart table.

'We're playing watchdog right now, Grizmund. Some of my men down in the delta stirred up genestealers two weeks ago, and blew the whistle. From the reports, it looks like the locals found some kind of tyranid scout-drone or incursion probe and woke it up. Emperor alone knows how long its been sending its beacon, but since the Shadow fell this morning, we can be sure it's been heard. I'd like you to move south. The evac convoy from the delta collective may need support if trouble starts there, and they're lagging.'

'We'll embark at once, and meet them en route.'

'Good, good...!' Caen turned to look at Hanff. 'Any joy with those damned Phyrus idiots yet?'

They'd been in Farm Collective 344/9 only six hours and Trooper Nink was already banging on that something bad was coming.

The Phyrus troopers were packing crates into the pack of heavy transports behind the main maize silo and the suns, a matched pair, were coming up hard and bright. Sergeant Syra Gallo tossed another crate up into Nink's hands and told him to shut the hell up.

'Of course there's something bad coming, you moron! That's why we're here! That's why we were diverted nine days ago with express orders to head for Malvolion! That's why we're busting our humps getting a bunch of dirt-

scratchers onto transports and away to the uplift! Something bad! Something really bad!

Nink looked down at him as if the sergeant had just broken awful news about his wife.

'Don't look at me like that.' Gallo turned around to regard the other men of the Phyrus Fourth Regiment who had all paused in their work. 'None of you!'

'For the Emperor's sake, you moon-eyed bastards, we're Imperial Guard! We only go to places like this because something bad is coming! I mean, the Warmaster doesn't say 'Oh, Malvolion, nothing bad's gonna happen there. Let's deploy thirty thousand of our brave Phyrus boys immediately!' does he? Eh? No he freaking doesn't! We're here because we are the Imperial freaking Guard and people give thanks and kiss our spotty butts in gratitude because we are there when that Something Bad arrives! Now get these crates stowed and tell yourselves this...'

Gallo dropped his voice and grinned at his men. 'We're the freaking Phyrus Fourth. We're stone-killers to a man. It had better be something really freaking bad because when it gets here, it's gonna find us, and we are gonna kill it so many times it's gonna wish it had never been born!'

There were cheers. Even Nink cheered. The Malvolion colonists trudging past to the waiting trucks further down the evacuation convoy line were silent and looked far too scared for Gallo's liking.

Silently, he just wished he knew what was coming, what they were up against, and why they were here.

'Repeated signals from Nacine Plain Command,' Vox-officer Binal called to Gallo.

'Yeah, yeah...'

'It's the general himself, sergeant. He wants to know why we're not moving yet.'

Gallo dropped a crate in contempt and turned to look at Binal. 'We're not moving because Major Hunnal hasn't given the order yet. Tell him that.'

'I did, sergeant. He wants to know why not.'

Wiping his sore, dusty palms, Gallo stalked away across the sunlit compound. 'Tell him I'll ask the major himself.'

Gallo entered the main hall of the collective, a dirty, zinc-panelled prefab that creaked in the heat. Air-scrubbers chattered fitfully. Gallo had seen the major and two other officers disappear inside an hour before to discuss the final evacuation conditions with the collective's selectmen.

'Major? Major Hunnal?'

Gallo checked a few rooms. The place was empty. Unnerved, he called in a squad to help him search. Five men, all in heavy Phyrus battledress, clattered in through the entryway to join him. One brought Gallo his las-gun. 'Spread out,' he told them.

Gallo and a trooper called Matlyg had the pleasure of finding Hunnal, the other two officers, and the six farm selectmen. What was left of them anyway. Reduced to blood and bone-meal, they coated the floor and walls of cargo bay behind the hall.

Matlyg threw up and fell over in the mess of bloody remains. Gallo tried to stammer into his vox-link.

Something tall and still that he had taken to be a roof support quivered and moved. Fast... so freaking fast! A scything talon the size of a grown man lashed out of the shadows and ripped the vomiting Matlyg into ribbons of flesh and a spume of airborne blood.

Gallo found his legs, retreating, screaming, firing. Purple plates knotted with whitish bone, iridescent green tendrils lapping between its jagged, filthy teeth, the mantis killer disengaged itself from the ultraviolet spectrum and shimmered into being, towering over him.

'Spook! Spook!' Gallo wailed.

His shots punching into the dark, bony plates of the thing's belly and chewed off some splinters of chitin. Then he was in through the doors and running.

The vox-channels were alive with panic. Gallo ran into two of his searchers and pulled them down into cover, backs against the prefab wall.

He was trying to tell them what he had seen when two metres of talon sliced in through the wall and one of the troopers. Blood boiled out of the trooper's sagging mouth as the talon withdrew and let him slide free. Gallo threw himself away as another bio-blade slammed through the wall and decapitated the other trooper, splitting his skull lengthways.

It can see us. Even through the walls, it can see our heat!

Gallo ran.

He reached the outside.

The evacuation convoy was where he had left it, still not underway. Now it would never get underway. Ever. Several trucks were overturned, and two were on fire. Phyras troops ran in all directions, firing into the smoke. Farmers and their families stampeded in panic all around. Bodies littered the ground. None were remotely intact.

Stumbling forward, Gallo found Nink. From the belly down, Nink was nothing

but tatters of bloody cloth, ropes of torn entrails and fragments of semi-articulated raw bone. But somehow, horribly, he was still alive. He clawed at Gallo, begging the sergeant to take him with him. Nink clutched at Gallo's leggings.

Gallo shot Nink through the forehead. A mercy, he considered.

He dropped into cover as a clutch of farmers tumbled by in extreme distress. Something darted after them, taller than a man, its armoured body swept forward over racing, bird-like limbs. The genestealer's primary limbs, hugely taloned, the uppermost of its four torso limbs, raked at the screaming settlers, disembowelling one. Its drooling tongue flapped between snapping teeth.

Like the mantis killer, it moved so fast...

It corralled the settlers, and two more abominations just like it chased in out of the fuel-oil smoke, stubby tails erect and wagging like excited dogs. Together, their limbs thrashed and ploughed, ripping the frantic people into offal.

Gallo realised two things with ghastly clarity. He would never forget the screams of the slaughtered farmers and their folk for as long as he lived. And that wasn't going to be very long.

He saw a mantis killer through the smoke, busy rending a track apart. He ran, reaching one of the laden tracks at the edge of the compound. Binal lay dead by the rear wheels. Gallo knew it was Binal because the corpse still wore the vox-caster set, even if it didn't have a head any more.

He tore the vox-unit from the body and clambered into the track's cab.

It took him a moment to find the emergency channel.

'344/9! 344/9!' he rasped. 'Incursion! Tyranid incursion! Repeat—'

There was no time to repeat. The genestealers were at the cab windows, on the bonnet, smashing the glass and reaching in.

Though unintelligible and more a sound of pain than real words, Gallo's last transmission was heard six hundred kilometres away at Nacine Plain.

The channel went dead. Caen looked away, avoiding Hanff's face as he tried to compose himself. That sound. That scream...

He was about to signal Grizmund's armour brigade, which had left the plain just forty minutes before to turn on a bearing for 132/5, but the sky went abruptly black.

Wind-borne spores began to winnow down around them, burning flesh and thickening the air.

Caen ran to get below as the first of the atmospheric toxins began killing

Mordian troops and navy personnel. Ship landing lights came on automatically as the natural light died, illuminating streams of pelting spores like a black blizzard.

Against the blackness high above, colossal shapes descended. Harridan brood-organisms, the tyrannid main dispersal form. Caen had read about them. But to see them, to see their size, smell their downwashed stink... it ruined his mind.

Swarms of winged bat-forms swirled out of them like drifts of fallen leaves billowing on the wind. The gargoyles filled the air, shrieking, targeting individual men, membranous wings beating. They executed steep, perilous dives, raking the ground beneath them with the flesh borers they clutched to their leathery torsos. Plasma fire rained down, shrivelling and igniting men as they ran for cover.

Caen pulled out his power-sword, and slashed at a gargoyle that swooped towards him. He split it into two, and was drenched in its stinking ichor.

He fell.

Rising, the ground shaking, he saw how the corrosive spore-mines were collapsing the superstructure of most of the landing ships. Bulk transports were sagging and melting as they lost integrity. Parts of some exploded outwards.

Things no bigger than a man scuttled forward through the burning darkness and confusion. Termagants and the larger, bounding hormagaunts. There were thousands of them, Caen realised. So many so many...

He sliced at the alien filth that closed on him. He cut the snout off one termagaunt, the forelimb off another. He was distracted by a liquid scream as Hanff, running for cover nearby, was destroyed by mycetic spores, both necrotic and corrosive. A fat, bubbly slick punctuated by corroding bone mass was all that remained of him after thirty seconds.

The fleshborer hit Caen in the chest. He writhed and wailed as it quivered and dug and turned the contents of his body cavity into mush.

The evac convoy was two hours out from 132/5 when they saw the change in weather patterns a hundred kilometres ahead. A dark stain, like a wash of thunderheads, was braising the distance, widening with every passing moment.

From the cab of unit 177, Grauss saw the blue skies fill with dark-bellied clouds. His guts tightened. Around the black stain in the distance, the weather was being tormented in an ever-expanding radius. Frothing clouds whirled cydonically like blast ripples from the ominous darkness. Drizzles of rain, thick with dingy fluid and what seemed like seed-pods, pelted down. The two

kilometre-long convoy switched on their headlights almost as one, and wipers began to beat.

'What the hell is this?' asked Trooper Femlyn, riding shotgun next to Grauss, an autogun across his lap.

'Turn west! Turn west!' Colonel Tiegl's voice rattled over the inter-vehicle comm. The convoy, ungainly and slow to respond, shunted and churned as it tried to make the new heading.

The air was sweet and hot, Grauss realised. It smelled like the pumping station hot-house.

Two trucks overturned on the trackway, slumping into revets as they tried to turn. Another three broke axles and were stranded. Tiegl left them and their screaming occupants behind.

'Nacine Plain has gone!' he yelled into his vox-horn. 'Our only hope is the main hive at Malvo Height! Turn west!'

Grauss looked at his chart-plate. Malvo Height was a thousand kilometres away to the west. They'd never reach it. Never.

He put his foot down anyway.

Grizmund's armour was running hard from the filth storm that expanded ever outwards from the Nacine Plain. All hope of reaching the evac convoy from 132/5 was gone. All hope was gone, period.

He turned his vehicles to meet the onrush. It was a slow business, because the torrential rain had turned the dry, stony fields to mud and tangles of vegetation were growing up out of it even as he watched. In the space of fifteen minutes a dry, arid upland had turned into a mossy, fern-filled swamp. Another hour, and it would be a thick, impenetrable jungle of creepers and moulds, spilling outwards and consuming the dry land.

Grizmund didn't have an hour, and would never see that floral conquest. His tank guns roared up into the dense packs of flying things that swooped from the staining sky. Burning, membranous creatures dropped to the ground or were annihilated in the air.

Then his tanks started to die. Advancing tides of biovore engines spat spore mines into them, blowing armour units apart or melting them with acid and poison. Overwhelming floods of hormagaunts and termagants skittered forward out of the deluge, completely burying some vehicles under their writhing numbers. The air pulsed with the psychic throb of the tyranid warriors, tall and hideous, as they advanced amidst the smaller monsters. Zoanthropes, glistening

like great floating brains, their atrophied limbs clutched to themselves, hovered over the swarms and flashed out lances of energy that blew tanks asunder.

Grizmund saw the twisting, lashing shapes of raveners approaching, and shouted down from his turret for the gun layer and aimer to increase fire.

Then the carnifex was on them. Shrieking, it lacerated two nearby tanks and flicked them aside. The last thing Grizmund saw was mouth of the venom cannon it raised towards his vehicle.

The evac convoy from collective 132/5 was running west, hard, turbines roaring. They'd laboriously crossed a network of interfarm trackways and finally made it onto a metalled highway running east-west, the main overland arterial route used by the produce road-trains every harvest season to ship grain to the world hive at Malvo Heights. They were kicking dust in a trail four kilometres long from the dry white roadway, passing irrigation canals and wide, flooded field-basins lined with rows of growing frames. Then the rain caught up with them again, washing out the dust, glistening the roadway, until they were kicking up spray instead.

South of them, the sky was pale and blue, north, black and oily like pitch, a swirling, expanding bolus of dark cloud that blotted out the light.

Femlyn was rechecking his autogun's drum magazine. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Grauss pulled out his laspistol and tossed it to Femlyn.

'Check it,' he ordered. 'My rifle too.'

The wipers were thumping hard. Wind blew spume up over the road from the waterbeds like ocean spray. Grauss tried not to notice the wriggling black spores that were hitting the windshield and conglomerating like pus in his wipers.

Through the driving rain, he saw the braking lights of the truck in front come on suddenly, and slammed on his own brakes. Rig 177 slid violently from side to side on the wet road. Femlyn cried out and Grauss hauled on the wheel. They stopped hard, clipping the rear bars of the truck ahead.

The inter-cab vox was crackling with shouts. Grauss opened his door, about to get out, peering ahead to identify the obstruction.

Something came off the back of the truck ahead of them and landed on the bonnet of 177, denting the metal. It crouched there, for what was probably only a second but felt like an eternity, the rain dribbling down over its bared, smiling teeth.

Femlyn threw Grauss his laspistol, and Grauss fired it wildly. His salvo burst the termagant's neck open in a fountain of noxious fluid and it crumpled off the bonnet.

Settlers were streaming back down the road past them in blind panic.

The track ahead started again, wheels spinning, drove ten metres and then plunged sideways off the road, rolling down the levee into the water-bed. Grauss saw four termagants scampering towards him. He stood on the throttle. Two of them were crashed under the heavy truck, another slammed away through the air after contact with the wheel arch.

Femlyn was firing out of the cab window. Shell cases tumbled down into the footwell.

The convoy ahead was now moving, though several tracks had slewed off the road and one was burning. Grauss had to drop speed to inch past them. Something grotesque and grinning appeared at the cab window beside Grauss and he dropped forward, allowing Femlyn to blast it through the glass.

A smaller vehicle drew level with them, matching their speed. It was one of the open, short wheel-base escorts mounting a Hydra battery. Grauss waved the driver past and then fell in behind. A moment later, the Hydra battery was pounding, firing directly ahead of the speeding machine. Grauss saw something big and iridescent explode under the anti-aircraft fire and collapse off the road. 177's wheels span in the ichor slick as they sped past.

Behind them, on the highway, the racing convoy was assailed by things that poured up out of the fields and irrigation channels to the north and into their hindquarters. The escort vehicles, mounting Hydras and heavy stub-guns, ran alongside the transports, raking the fields. Mantis killers reared and clacked their talons, disintegrating in drizzles of mucus and chitin as the guns found them. Swarming termagants were smashed under speeding wheels. Hit by multiple fleshborers, a Hydra track span out of control and flew off the road, exploding in a drain canal. Biovore spore mines cramped down, blowing two of the fast-moving transports into fragments.

There were bat-shapes in the air above.

The convoy's heavier armour - four Chimeras and a half dozen standard-pattern Lemman Russ tanks in Mordian camo, were lagging badly, and found themselves cut off from the fleeing convoy elements.

Hormagaunts overran two of the Chimeras, covering their hulls with squirming shapes as they opened them like seed cases. Two of the tanks stopped dead, traversed their turrets and began pounding at the wave of obscenities that rippled after the convoy. The crews knew they were as good as dead. Mordian discipline made them sell their lives as dearly as they could. Spitting bio-plasma destroyed one tank. The other was struck by some energised flash that looked like green

lightning, and blew apart as its munitions ignited.

Caught by a trio of lictors, another Chimera tried to turn and was thrown end over end, torn track sections flying. Corrosive spores reduced another of the Leman Russes to tar and semi-solid lumps.

Standing in the back of a speeding escort truck, Colonel Tiegl manned the gun mount himself. Searing, frenzied, red tendrils had just turned his main gunner inside out. He swung the stub-gun on its pintle, squeezing the firing grip, spraying the road behind him with twin, dipping, dragging streams of heavy fire. He was drenched with rain.

There was something in his mouth, something crawling on his skin. Mycetic spores plastered him, eating him away.

By the time his driver fell to a barb-round and spun the vehicle into a transport's back wheels with splintering force, there was nothing left of Tiegl but some articulated limb bones dragging from the gun-grip.

Ten kilometres on, out of the irrigated arable spread and into the lowlands beyond, evac 132/5 found there was no going forward. The convoy was a ragged mess. The black, weeping sky had utterly overtaken what remained of the column and the tide of horror was upon them.

Femlyn was blasting from the cab window with his autogun, and Grauss was firing his lasrifles out the other side. There was no shifting truck 177 now. Vines, thorn-creepers and other fast-growing things had meshed the axles and ruptured the tyres.

'Look! Look!' cried Femlyn.

There were dots in the sky, burning dots that fast resolved themselves into drop-pods flaring in atmospheric entry. A dozen, two dozen, three.

'Oh, praise the Emperor!' Grauss breathed.

The first pods hit the ground, bouncing and tearing through the cushion of foliage.

Grauss saw the men clamber out. Adeptus Astartes. Space Marines, the Lamenters. They had come, as promised, yellow armour gleaming in the dying light. They had come despite the odds.

The giant armoured warriors, humanity's finest, deployed from their pods, blasting with boltguns, flamers and meltas. Termagants and hormagaunts exploded beneath the withering firepower. Flamers burned the stinking plant growth away. Gargoyles were blown, ruptured, out of the sky. Grauss saw a ravener convulse and die under a melta's kiss. He saw plasma-fire destroy a

mantis killer.

There, a Marine with a power claw ripped a tyranid warrior in two, the corpse exploding with bile and psychic energy. Here, a Marine with a rocket launcher sent up a jinking missile that blew a zoanthrope into flaring specks of matter.

Grauss leapt from the track's cab and ran into the fray, his lasgun blasting. Mordian troopers were with him now, enervated by the Lamenters' swinging assault. Grauss cut down a leaping termagaunt in mid-air, blowing it apart. He saw four Marines cripple and kill a lictor nearby.

We could live, we could live yet, he thought triumphantly!

He heard a keening behind him, and turned to face the horror of a carnifex charging, blades clicking, saliva flying from the cutting limbs. Femlyn tried to turn his autogun but became nothing more than a shower of meat.

A lamenter, two of them, hit the screamer-killer from the left side with bolt rounds, and as it turned, destroying its head with melta-fire. Its scything blades, still whickering lethally as it toppled, decapitated them both.

Grauss fell to his knees. He honestly didn't think it possible that Space Marines could die. They seemed to him invulnerable, god-like, the walking manifestations of the God-Emperor of Terra himself. But it was true. He looked down at the fallen, splintered helm of one Marine, the glassy, dull, dead face peering out of it.

He looked away, but saw another Lamenter ripped in two by a mantis killer fifty meters away. A ravener fell, twisting and flicking, onto three more and ground them into the soil, ripping open their armour with its chitinous mouth-parts.

Then Grauss saw the worst sight of all, the worst, most unmanning thing his eyes had ever witnessed. Four Lamenters Space Marines: falling back, overwhelmed.

They scrambled through the treacherous, matted ground-growth, trying to find cover from the zoanthrope that shimmered after them, spitting bolts of energised death. They turned, fired, ran on, to no avail. The hovering thing exploded one of them and then closed on the other three. One headed left and ran onto the keening bone-swords of a tyranid warrior. Another was felled by a glancing blast from the zoanthrope and was swiftly torn apart by a pack of termagants.

The last made it another twenty metres before the relentless zoanthrope hit him and exploded his armoured form with a vicious stab of energy.

Grauss couldn't believe what he was seeing.

In the first twenty minutes from drop, the Lamenters had cut a hole in the alien

assault that had punished them cruelly. Now, in just five more minutes, they were being annihilated.

A spore mine from a biovore blew two more apart and sent a wash of mud and sap high into the air.

Two Lamenters faced down another carnifex and blew it apart with sustained bolt fire. A second later, they were both dismembered by hormagaunts before they could reload.

Grauss saw the hive tyrant advancing through the flaming greenery, slaughtering Space Marines with its massive blade. He saw the vast, obscene shapes of the bio-titans lurching forward in the distant smog.

The last Lamerter died thirty-nine minutes after the first had clambered from his drop-pod.

The convoy was ablaze, what parts of it weren't shredded or swarmed over.

Grauss dropped into a foxhole, feeling the undergrowth flourish and twist around him. His body was crawling with parasitic infection. He heard chattering.

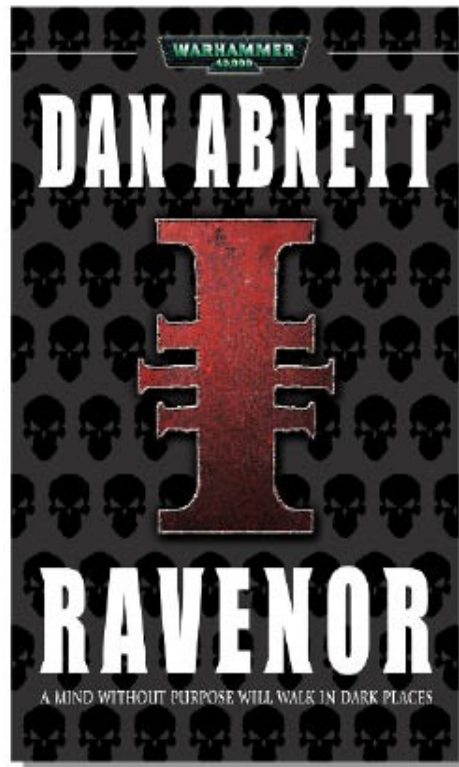
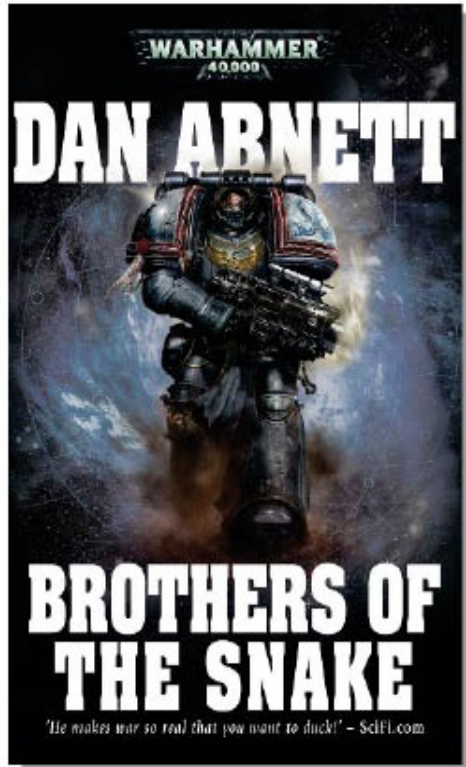
On the horizon line, most nightmarish of all, the vile ripper swarms were moving in, consuming everything in their path, eating up the world.

Karl Grauss made his peace with the God-Emperor, with his long dead parents, with his long-lost homeworld, beloved, distant Mordia, praying it would never suffer this blasphemous fate.

He put the snout of his lasgun in his open mouth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both New York Times bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.



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